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ABSTRACT

Focusing on how television viewing fits into a general model of consumer consumption patterns, a study examined (1) the extent to which the viewing of certain television content can be considered a "norm" of society, (2) similarities and differences between the norms for adults and those for children, and (3) some of the antecedents of beliefs about the appropriateness of TV viewing behavior related to a variety of content. Research was based on a cross-sectional survey of adults in a southeastern city. Telephone interviews were conducted with 285 individuals (a 70% response rate) who were asked for their reactions to a potential television viewing situation involving: (1) an adult; or (2) a preschool child. Five types of program content were identified: crime/adventure shows, news programs, sports, cartoons, and adult movies on pay TV. Factors analyzed included viewing norms of adults, norms of adult opinion on appropriate content for child viewing, and some individual factors associated with these norms. Results indicated that there are social norms geared toward some types of television content, and that different types of viewing behavior are normative for adults, as opposed to children. Results suggested that adherence to the norm, rather than similarity of viewing should be a main focus on research on intergenerational transfer of viewing patterns. (Three pages of references and three tables of data are included.) (NKA)

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Television Content Viewing Patterns: Some Clues from Societal Norms

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Television Content Viewing Patterns: Some Clues from Societal Norms

Abstract

A reason for the lack of similarity between parents' and children's television viewing patterns may be that viewing norms prescribe different viewing behaviors for the two roles. This study examines differences in the appropriateness of viewing particular content and the intensity of viewing norms for children and adults. Results suggest that adherence to the norm, rather than similarity of viewing, should be a major focus of research on intergenerational transfer of viewing patterns.

Television Content Viewing Patterns: Some Clues from Societal Norms

During the past two decades, considerable work has focused on intergenerational transfer processes within the family (Chaffee, Jackson-Beeck, Durall and Wilson, 1977; Dawson and Prewitt, 1977; Jennings and Niemi, 1974, 1981). Of most interest to communication researchers has been work on the transfer of communication patterns within the family and subsequent effects of those communication patterns (e.g., Chaffee, et al., 1977; Chaffee, McLeod and Wackman, 1971; Chaffee, McLeod and Wackman, 1973; ; McLeod and O'Keefe, 1972; Tims and Masland, 1984; 1985).

Chaffee (1978) suggests that considerable constraint on the range of media content available to children can be imposed by parents - either through direct control of media within the home or through interpersonal communication patterns within the family. Most research evidences suggests that direct parental control of media content is slight, at best (Mohr, 1979; McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn and Fallis, 1982).

A growing body of research investigates the area of family structure and communication processes affecting the availability and use of the mass media (Chaffee, McLeod and Wackman, 1973; Chaffee and Tims, 1976; Hollenbeck, 1978; Lull, 1982, McLeod and Chaffee, 1972). These researchers seek an understanding of how mass communication is used in the home, how patterns develop, and under what conditions communication may have effects.

The literature evolves partly from early work on how families interact with television (cf., Blood, Jr., 1961; McDonagh, 1951; Smith, 1961-62; Wand, 1968), and partly from the political socialization perspective on intergenerational transfer (Dalton, 1980; Jennings and Niemi, 1968, 1974).

Because of the political socialization roots, much of this work is limited in focus to public affairs or political information consumption. In this paper we take a broader context, seeing the development of norms about television viewing as fitting into a general model of development of consumer consumption patterns.

Our approach is threefold: 1) to examine the extent to which the viewing of certain television content can be considered "norms" of society; 2) to examine similarities and differences between the norms for adults and those for children; and 3) to assess some of the antecedents of beliefs about the appropriateness of television viewing behavior related to a variety of content.

Much has been written about the effect of television portrayals on the development of consumer norms (cf., Moore and Moschis, 1983; Ward, 1974; Ward, Wackman and Wartella, 1977). A conspicuous absence in this area is an investigation into the effect of television portrayals on television consumption (i.e., amount of viewing) or television viewing patterns (i.e., content preferences). This absence is especially interesting in light of the fact that, for most Americans, television is by far the most time-consuming pastime, except for sleep (Sahin & Robinson,

1980). The lack of research may be for an obvious reason: although characters portrayed on television are seen in a wide array of contexts, they are very seldom seen watching television. We therefore suggest that television portrayals of viewing have little impact on the development of consumption norms for viewing.

The elimination of television portrayals as a major influence on development of a child's television consumption then refocuses attention on the family and intergenerational transfer. Banks and Gupta (1980) and Bryant and Gerner (1981) both find substantial support for a consumer socialization model of television viewing in which a parent's use of the medium impacts on children's use. We would also add peer influence as a chief factor in developing consumption patterns for television (McDonald, in press; McLeod, et.al., 1982; Riley and Riley, 1951). Children probably learn to adopt television consumption norms from example, from outright verbalization by parents, and by talking with friends about what they watch.

A problem with some of the socialization literature on parental modelling effects is that hypotheses of isomorphism between parent and child viewing <u>patterns</u> (i.e., amount of a specific content type) are tested, suggesting that parents and children should behave similarly. However, it is most probable that parents hold different norms about what kind of content is acceptable or appropriate for adults, and what kind is acceptable for children. Newcomb (1953) suggests it is inappropriate to test for similarities between parent and child behaviors when the

norms prescribe differences in behavior for the two roles. In these cases, research should focus on common subscription to the prescribed role behaviors.

If television viewing norms are different for parents and children, at least two factors should be affected. First, the specific television content/topic areas being investigated in research will impact on whether or not a relationship is found between parental viewing patterns and patterns of their children. Some types of content will be appropriate for both children and adults, and some types will not. If parents have transmitted the same normative values for their children, viewing pattern similarity will be found in topic areas with similar norm values for both children and adults; viewing pattern similarity will not be found if the norms suggest certain material is appropriate for one and not appropriate for the other.

Second, research should be designed to compare <u>perceived viewing norms</u> for adults and children. Comparisons should be made between the adults' norms for children and the children's patterns, and, in longitudinal studies, adult viewing patterns with their parents' viewing a generation before. If viewing norms are different for parents and children, and if these norms are successfully transmitted, viewing patterns should be different, not similar, for children and their parents, slowly evolving into similar patterns as the child becomes an adult.

This study examines television viewing norms of adults, the adults' norms about how appropriate it is for children to view certain types of content, and some individual factors

associated with these norms. Because television viewing patterns are probably not transmitted to any great extent through television programs, we assume that they are transmitted primarily through interpersonal interaction among family and friends.

The study is exploratory in that it points the way toward one possibility in reconciling limited results in parental modelling effects research by suggesting areas in which we would expect to find little congruence, and areas in which we should find considerable correspondence.

Method

The study is based on a cross-sectional sample survey of adults in a southeastern city with a population of approximately 68,000. Interviewing was conducted by trained graduate students and advanced undergraduates as part of a communication research methods course, and random digit dialing procedures were used to select the sample. Telephone interviews were conducted with 285 respondents and the response rate was more than 70% with three call-backs. About 43% of the sample had graduated from college and the average age was 35.

The dependent variables for the study were general norms about television viewing as well as some characteristics of those norms (based on a theoretical perspective of Jackson, 1969). Normative television viewing was assessed through responses to a series of questions about a potential viewing situation. Respondents were asked if they would <u>strongly approve</u>, <u>approve</u>, <u>feel indifferent</u>, <u>disapprove</u> or <u>strongly disapprove</u> of a middle

aged adult in their family who frequently watched five specific types of television content. The program types were crime/adventure shows, news programs, sports, cartoons, and adult movies on pay television. Respondents also were asked how they would feel if there were a pre-school aged child in their family who frequently watched the same kinds of programs.

Description and analyses of viewing norms for the five content types were based on Glynn's (1985) adaptations of Jackson's (1969) model of social norms. That is, Jackson views the normative range as bounded by the points where behavior meets shared disapproval. In order to investigate characteristics of norms based on this range, Jackson constructed a "Return Potential Model", consisting of a "behavioral dimension" and an "evaluative dimension." According to Jackson, for any particular behavior on the behavioral dimension, the amount of approval or disapproval felt by members of a group toward the act (or potential act) may, in principle, fall along the evaluative dimension. The characteristics he describes (although by no means exhaustive) are based on these behavioral and evaluative dimensions.

We modify Jackson's model somewhat by holding behaviors constant in order to examine a qualitative dimension, that of attitudes toward media <u>content</u> (Figure 1). Our modification is based on the suggestion that, even though the original model implies measurement of an actual behavior, the dimension can include the <u>tendency</u> to behave (cf., Glynn, 1985; Jackson, 1969). We examine approval/disapproval of adults and children viewing

these five content areas and plot a "return potential curve" to describe the feelings of individuals about this hypothetical situation (Figure 1). This curve is obtained by plotting the mean of respondents' feelings about each particular content area.

---Figure 1 about here---

As Jackson (1969) notes, the return potential curve incorporates the essential elements of a "norm", yet it tells us "nothing about the actual behavior that occurs, only about the feelings held in abeyance, waiting to be triggered off if certain acts of behavior occur." The curve is not intended to define the norm, but only to define the boundaries of the norm and, in principle, the curve can take any form. Two major characteristics described by Jackson (1969) and of particular interest in this study are norm "intensity" and "crystallization."

Intensity

Jackson's (1969) "intensity" characteristic of norms is the extent to which a behavior or potential behavior is approved or disapproved by members of a group. In order to measure the intensity of a norm, Jackson recommends summing the ordinates or heights of the return potential curve over each scale position on the behavior dimension. Intensity thus reflects the total area encompassed by the curve. We depart from Jackson's procedure because the definition does not provide for the possibility of several points summing near zero even though both may be very intense. Such a situation is probably more likely in evaluation of a qualitative dimension, but might also be present in

behavioral dimensions of norms if the behavior is rigidly prescribed (e.g., high approval for a certain amount of the behavior, high disapproval for a different amount). We therefore sum the absolute value of the ordinates to obtain an intensity measure.

Crystallization of a Norm

Jackson (1969), notes that an important question regarding the characteristics of norms is whether the norm has "crystallized" for a particular behavior. His crystallization measure is derived by summing the total variance or dispersion for all scale positions on the behavior dimension. When the amount of dispersion is large, indicating that opinions of appropriate or inappropriate behavior do not coincide, the degree of crystallization is low; when dispersion is slight, the degree of crystallization is high.

Independent Variables

The independent variables for the study include the average number of hours of television respondents state that they view on a typical weekday evening. In addition, individuals were questioned regarding their use of television for specific content as follows:

> When you watch television, about how often do you watch the following kinds of television programs? Do you watch frequently, sometimes, rarely or never, editorials and news commentaries?

This question also was asked about viewing national news, local news, crime or adventure shows, and sports programs.

Control variables include education ("What is the highest year of school you have completed?"), age ("What is your age?"), total household income (a 5-point scale ranging from less than $5,000 to more than $50,000), and the number of children and adults living in the household. Because Jackson's measures have not received extensive testing, it is not clear which statistics are appropriate for analysis. Traditional equality of variance F-tests and t-tests for differences between means were used for descriptive and comparative purposes. Hierarchical multiple regression provided the major statistical technique for analyzing the antecedents of approval ratings.

Results

Intensity of Approval for Television Viewing

Mean approval ratings for adults viewing the five content categories (crime, news, sports, cartoons and adult movies) are all positive (Figure 1 and Table 1). The highest mean adult approval rating is for frequently viewing news, although approval for frequent viewing of sports is nearly as high. The "point of maximum return" -- the behavior that will receive the most approval for adults -- is news.

-----Table 1 about here-----

For children, two of the five categories have negative mean ratings, indicating overall disapproval for children frequently viewing those content types. Sports programs are given the

highest approval, while cartoons and news are also fairly high. Crime/Detective and adult-oriented programming receive negative means, indicating disapproval for children who "frequently view" those types of programs.

Jackson (1969) describes norm intensity as the "overall supportive or threatening atmosphere" associated with the norm. As previously noted, Jackson (1969) suggests that the sum of all of the responses for each behavior will indicate the general tendency of approval (positive sums) or disapproval (negative sums). The more extreme the sum, the more threatening or approving the norm. Of course, sums related to viewing follow very much the same pattern as the means, with adult movies providing the most threatening atmosphere for children, sports most supported (Table 1). Over all content categories, the intensity of the viewing norm for children (1356) was nearly twice that of the norm for adults (705).

Crystallization of TV Viewing Norms

Mean approval/disapproval ratings for the content types have little meaning unless there is high crystallization, a measure of the extent to which norms can actually be said to exist. Children's frequent viewing of sports programs exhibits the highest degree of crystallization (variance of .35). Norms about viewing adult movies are least crystallized for adults (variance of 1.24), while this same category is second most crystallized for children, indicating fairly consensual disapproval of this behavior for children, but no real agreement on approval or disapproval of adults viewing this content.

Antecedents of Viewing Norms

We assessed the antecedents of these approval ratings for adults and for children through multiple regression analyses (Tables 2 and 3). Respondent viewing estimates were only available for three of the five content areas: crime/adventure, news, and sports. We expected that the respondent's own viewing of specific categories would be the best predictor of his/her rating of approval of adults viewing those types of content, and that respondent's approval of adult viewing would be the best predictor of approval ratings for children.

-----Tables 2 and 3 about here-----

For crime/adventure, news and sports programs, respondents' own viewing amount was positively related to approval of adults who "frequently watched" that type of content (Table 2). For approval of adult viewing of crime/adventure shows, only respondent's own viewing of that content type was significantly related to approval. However, 18% of the variance in approval was explained by the equation.

Aside from the respondent's viewing of the content type itself, approval ratings for several of the categories were related to other variables. Age was a significant predictor of approval ratings for two of the content categories - news and sports programs - with older persons expressing less approval than younger respondents. The number of hours the respondent usually spends watching television was positively related to approval for two of the content categories - sports and cartoons.

Two of the content categories, cartoons and adult movies, were somewhat different from the others. The frequency with which the respondent viewed crime/detective programs was a significant predictor of approval of an adult viewing cartoons. The only other significant predictor of approval for an adult viewing cartoons was the amount of time spent viewing television on an average day.

Probably most interesting is the extent to which background and home factors play a significant role in predicting approval of an adult who watches adult-oriented programming. Age of respondent and the number of children in the household are both negatively related to approval, while income is positively related.

The situation is somewhat different for approval of children viewing these same content types. For all five content types, approval of an adult viewing specific content was the best predictor of respondent approval of a child viewing that same content type -- strongest relationships were found for crime, sports and adult movies. Respondent viewing of two of the categories -- crime/adventure and news programs -- was a significant predictor of approval for children viewing the same content, but this relationship does not hold for sports content.

One of the more interesting aspects of Table 3 is that traditional background characteristics provide little predictive power in describing approval of children's viewing. Of the five nontelevision viewing variables, across the five content areas, there are only two significant relationships: the number of

adults in the household is positively related to evaluation of children viewing sports programs, and the number of children in the home is negatively related to approval for children viewing crime/adventure programs. There appears to be something of a link between adult viewing of what one might call "competitive content" - sports and crime detective shows - and the approval of cartoons for children.

Most interesting among these approval ratings for children is the lack of prediction in approval for viewing news, the most investigated of content type areas. In fact, even though two variables are significant predictors (respondent viewing of news and respondent approval of adults viewing news), the entire equation accounts for only 9% of the variance in approval for children, and the resulting equation is nonsignificant, the only nonsignificant equation of the five content areas.

Discussion

The research reported here suggests that one of the limitations in much of the literature on development of mass media use habits and patterns is that topics being investigated may be prescribed by different norms for adults and children. If researchers search for congruence between parent and child, but norms dictate different behavior for parent and child, findings will indicate few relationships, even if both parent and child subscribe completely to the norm.

This study suggests that there are social norms geared toward some types of television content, and different types of viewing behavior are normative for adults, as opposed to

children. While adult news viewing is most highly approved, all five of the program types investigated were generally approved for adults. Two of the five content types were disapproved for children - crime-detective and adult-oriented programming.

Adult-oriented programming showed wide dispersion in approval ratings for adults, suggesting the lack of a specific social norm for that content type. However, of the five content types investigated in this study, respondents reported most consistent disapproval for children viewing adult-oriented programming, suggesting a strong social norm for children.

Some notion of the validity of this normative approach can be seen in comparison to three aspects of Himmelweit and Swift's (1976) longitudinal analysis of continuities in media usage and taste. They note that different types of content are appealing to people at different periods of their lives, that background factors such as income and education account little for preference for sports content in the media, and that family background makes little difference in preference for news content.

Similar to the age-related differences reported by Himmelweit and Swift (1976), we found different viewing norms for adults and for children. Additionally, we found that amount of sports viewing, amount of general television viewing, and age are the only factors related to approval of sports viewing.
An extension of the Himmelweit and Smith (1976) finding that family background makes little difference in preference for news content is the finding from the present study that a respondent's

approval of an adult who frequently views news, although statistically significant, makes less impact than does a similar measure for most of the other content types.

This study also is important in relation to an interesting conclusion of the Himmelweit and Swift (1976) research: continuity in media taste does not occur if the taste is normative for the age or subculture. This study takes a first step in testing such an hypothesis by ascertaining which tastes are normative for children and which tastes are normative for adults. One clear hypothesis for future research should be to test, in a longitudinal design, whether the Himmelweit and Swift (1976) suggestion (that media tastes that conform to societal norms for specific age groups do not persist in later life) holds for both approved and disapproved behaviors.

One of the most interesting findings relates to the norms surrounding television news viewing. Here we see strong approval (and strong crystallization) for adults viewing news frequently, with somewhat less approval and crystallization for children. If such a norm is generally felt throughout society, this may help explain why many studies have found little relationship between public affairs media use of parents and their children (cf., McLeod, et.al., 1982). Researchers may be searching for similarity when the norm itself suggests different behaviors for the parent and child roles.

Sherif and Sherif (1953) have suggested that norms may be more exacting for leaders than for other group members. The generally high degree of crystallization for approval/disapproval

of children viewing certain types of content suggests that television viewing norms are probably more exacting for children than for adults. This finding appears at first to conflict with reports that parents impose few overt restrictions on their children's television viewing (cf., Mohr, 1979; McLeod et.al., 1982). However, the finding may be seen as supporting Chaffee's (1978) notion of indirect parental control through indirect (primarily nonverbal) structuring of communication patterns within the family. If the Sherif and Sherif (1953) suggestion is taken at face value, these results may be seen as supporting the "reverse modelling" hypothesis by indicating the leaders in the viewing situation. If children are leaders in determining what is viewed in the home, it would follow that their viewing norms are more exacting. Further research is needed on this point.

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Table 1
The Distribution of Approval for Viewing Content

	$\bar{x}$	Variance	Sum	Minimum	Maximum
Crime/Detective:					
Adult	.15[1]	.76	43	-2	2
Child	-.79	.88	-221	-2	1
News:					
Adult	1.17[1]	.42[2]	328	-1	2
Child	.80	.56	226	-2	2
Sports:					
Adult	.86	.44[2]	242	-1	2
Child	.90	.35	253	-1	2
Cartoons:					
Adult:	.24[1]	.91[2]	66	-2	2
Child	.87	.55	244	-2	2
Adult Movies:					
Adult:	.09[1]	1.24[2]	26	-2	2
Child:	-1.47	.51	-412	-2	2

Note. Positive values denote approval, negative disapproval.

1=correlated t-test $p<.05$
2=equality of variance F-test $p<.05$

Table 2
Multiple Regression Predicting Approval of Adult Viewing

	Content Types				
	Crime	News	Sports	Cartoons	Adult
AGE	-.06	-.18**	-.18**	.02	-.23**
EDUCATION	.05	.05	-.03	.05	-.01
INCOME	.04	.09	.03	-.05	.13*
# OF CHILDREN	-.03	.06	.06	.03	-.10
# OF ADULTS	.03	-.02	.00	-.04	-.14*
TV HOURS	.08	.09	.14*	.16**	.09
NATIONAL NEWS	.02	.21**	.11	-.08	-.08
LOCAL NEWS	.00	.01	-.00	.01	-.03
CRIME/DETECTIVE	.34**	-.08	.03	.13*	.08
SPORTS	.02	.03	.30**	.04	.05
R^2	.18**	.09	.17**	.07	.13*

Note. Table entries are standardized regression coefficients.

**p<.05
*p<.10

Table 3
Multiple Regression Predicting Approval of Child Viewing

	Content Types				
	Crime	News	Sports	Cartoons	Adult
APPROVAL OF ADULT	-.33**	.20**	.30**	.13*	.32
AGE	-.08	-.07	.12	.10	-.08
EDUCATION	.13*	-.00	-.07	-.11	-.09
INCOME	.01	-.02	.01	.07	-.04
# OF CHILDREN	-.16**	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.07
# OF ADULTS	.01	.07	.14**	.05	.00
TV HOURS	.06	.09	.12*	.06	-.05
NATIONAL NEWS	.02	-.04	-.06	.02	-.05
LOCAL NEWS	-.14**	.14*	.07	-.07	-.04
CRIME/DETECTIVE	.17**	-.01	-.02	.14*	.06
SPORTS	.10	.05	.07	.16**	.15**
R^2	.33**	.09	.20**	.13**	.19**

Note. Table entries are standardized regression coefficients.

**p<.05
*p<.10

Figure 1

RESPONDENTS' APPROVAL OF VIEWING OF FIVE TELEVISION CONTENT TYPES